

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who never gives up on you, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

I have to admit, this was a hard week for me wrestling with this Gospel text. I mean this text could have been divided up into at least 3, maybe 4 different texts. We go from Jesus learning about two different tragedies. One where the Governor, Pontius Pilate murdered some folks from Galilee while they were worshipping at the Temple. Some of their blood mingled with the blood of their sacrifice. This was a sacrilege. The other involved a tower collapsing and killing some 18 people. In response to this news, Jesus gives a teaching about repentance. He moves directly into a parable about the unfruitful fig tree. From there we skip over several verses and take up the story with Jesus being warned by the Pharisees that Herod was out to get him, and He should run away. Jesus then prophesies about the remaining work He still has to accomplish before going into Jerusalem. Jesus then takes a rare moment to reflect and lament over the city of Jerusalem. See what I mean? There's a lot of seemingly unconnected stories jammed into this Gospel text. It would take an entire sermon for each one... It might make a good sermon series, but we don't have the time or scope for that.

So, I tried to pick one part of this massive text to relate the Gospel of Jesus. First the story about the disasters. Yes, life is too short and fragile. Nobody knows how long we have on earth. The best way to live in that uncertainty is to live a life

of repentance where you recognize your sin and confess it to God. Then walk blamelessly, serving God by serving our neighbor. OK, I get that message, but I don't find a lot of Gospel, Good News in that message...

Then I looked at the end to the text to the stories about Herod the fox and Jesus lamenting over the city of Jerusalem. Hard to find any Good News there... That left me with the fig tree... I admit, I don't know much about fig trees, but here's what I do know. A typical fig tree will take about 3 years before it can be expected to produce figs. So, in our parable Jesus says the landowner had come three times expecting to gather fruit. That means the tree was already at least 6 years old. We also know the gardener doesn't want to give up because he's the one who started the tree from a sapling and had nurtured it this far. If they cut the tree down now, he'll have to start over from scratch with another sapling. The gardener has a vested interest in keeping the tree a while longer so that all his work hasn't been in vain. He doesn't want to give up on the tree just yet...

I read a story about Winston Churchill this week. He was giving the commencement address at Harrow School in England in 1941. Do you remember what was happening in England in 1941? Britain was being bombed almost daily by the German Luftwaffe. The British people were well on the way to despair. Out of that context there arose an urban legend about this speech that Mr. Churchill gave. He was given a very long and glorious introduction and he came to the

podium cleared his throat and said, “Never give up.” Then he returned to his seat and sat down. After several awkward moments, he came back to the podium and said it again, “Never give up.” He then went back and sat down. It’s said he returned to that podium 5 times and each time he repeated the words, “Never give up.” Unfortunately, I couldn’t find any corroboration for that urban myth, but he did give a speech at the Harrow School in 1941 where he said, “Never give in...” He added some qualifying weasel words that would allow you to get out of taking a position on any topic if you weren’t convinced in your conscience... Even though it was probably never said, it’s still good advice for us. Never give up is good advice when you’re facing the negative side of life. It’s good advice when you’re working hard to fulfill your life’s dream or your goals. It’s good advice in our prayer life when we pray for someone or for something. Never give up! Even when you can’t see any progress whatsoever, you never know what the future holds and when your efforts might be ready to pay big dividends.

To never give up is a nice slogan or way to encourage a friend having a bad day, but what about when you’re facing the daily bombardment of life’s liquid do-do? Where does the hope for a better tomorrow come from when all you know is defeat and failure? When temples and churches are no longer safe sanctuaries and when towers fall, killing many people, what keeps you strong in your faith?

When a community loses an 11-year-old boy to suicide, how can we still believe in a loving, and almighty God...

When you start asking these kinds of questions, maybe the committee that put all these stories together for this Sunday was smarter than I gave them credit. Jesus doesn't give any answer to why these bad things happened. My belief is that although God most certainly is almighty, God doesn't normally intervene in human history because when the world was created, God gave humans freedom of will, to act and do what we want. From that moment on, God has never stopped wooing humanity into this never-ending love affair. God loves us and desperately wants us to love God too.

That brings us to the fig tree... We've all heard the allegorical way this has been interpreted. The Landowner is God. The vineyard is the Church, the fig tree is you and or me. The gardener is Jesus... So, Jesus buys us more time in the hope we will bare fruit. In the meanwhile, Jesus tills around our roots, covers us in manure, and gives us plenty of water and sunshine to produce the fruit we were made to produce. That allegory works for the most part, but what if we turned it on its heels. Suppose we're the landowners, Jesus is still the gardener and God is the fig tree. When bad things happen do you turn away from God or till the soil of your faith and talk to the pastor so he or she can add a little manure, and give God more time to make God's plan known. In other words, do you become jaded and

cynical when the world doesn't go your way, or do you turn back even more to God, increasing your prayers and trusting all the more? By the way, when Jesus called for the people to repent when they learn about the bad news our world serves up on a daily basis, the Greek word he used is μετανοέω (*Metanao*), which literally means to change directions, in this case to return to God...

It sounds really good on paper. All we have to do when things go south is repent or turn back to our God. If only it were so easy... We don't do it, maybe we can't do it because we're broken and sinful from the inside out... In our text we skip from this parable of the fig tree directly to the warning about Herod, Jesus showing His bravado in continuing on his very long and circuitous journey to Jerusalem, and His pause to lament over the people's rejection of God's prophets, including himself. In this scenario, we're the ones who give up and want to cut the tree down. We're the ones who give up on God. We're the ones who need to hear those words probably not spoken by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in the midst of German bombing, "Never Give Up!" When towers fall, when sickness comes, when death pays its unwanted visit, listen to Jesus and return to God where you will find love, and peace. The message of the fig tree is for us. It reminds us that God is full of mercy and never gives up on you or on me, but it also calls us to never give up on God—to never stop praying and hoping and trusting in God's love and mercy.

Today, we welcomed another sister into the Body of Christ. Another fig tree sapling was planted in God's Kingdom. It's now our job to nurture her and teach her the ways of this Kingdom she is now a part of. Scarlett was born a sinner. She was crucified with Christ and drown in the waters of Baptism. She has also risen with Christ now clothed in His righteousness and completely covered by God's grace. The same grace that saved a sinner like me and you. Let's pray she produces much fruit for the Kingdom of God!

I imagine a longer ending to this little parable of the fig tree. Suppose the gardener does fertilize, till and water the fig tree another year. Suppose the sun shined down and all the conditions were exactly perfect for fig production, but when the landowner returns the next year there's still no figs. The way my parable goes the gardener begs for another year to till and water and fertilize. The owner grants the gardener another year and then another, and another...

May the tragedies of this life grab your attention and help you focus more on the God who loves you and never gives up on you. May you find the faith to trust Jesus even when temples and towers are falling. May you return to God's love and care where peace is yours and each obstacle in life only brings you closer to God who grants us another year – another chance for repentance – another chance to receive God's amazing grace. Amen.